

## WHY “MAVERICK”?

Lowell Sumner, former Director of the Sierra Club and co-founder of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR), was a skilled National Park Service naturalist and a complicated man. But why was he known as “The Maverick Biologist”?

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Seventy-five years ago, at the age of nine, my mother stuck a safety pin holding a shipping tag through my collar. On the tag were written these words:

*Dear porter, please offload my son at the Menlo Park, California, station where he will be met by his aunt and uncle, Ethel and Lowell Sumner.*

*Thank you, L.P. Couffer, West Coast Freight Agent, Penn*

*RR.*

Then my father drove me to the railroad station in Glendale. My dad’s railroad connection gave me privilege along with special handling, or so I thought.

That was the first of what would be six consecutive summers that I would spend the long school break with my aunt and uncle at their 360-acre ranch in the Santa Cruz Mountains. At that age I had little notion of the complexity of my uncle Lowell’s job. I knew that he worked for the National Parks Service, had an office in San Francisco, and that he took frequent trips to wild places. I was more interested in the chores he assigned to me. He lent me his single shot .22 rifle, showed me how to work the bolt action, carefully advised on safety measures, stuffed my pocket with ammunition, and paid a nickel for every ground squirrel tail I brought to him. When I had swept the vegetable garden clean of squirrels, he handed me a notebook, his binoculars, and sent me on a long hike to report on the status of the eagle nest that could be spied into from the ridge above Mindigo Canyon, the southern boundary of the ranch. That was an every-Tuesday job and on three consecutive Tuesdays I wrote in my notebook: “two eggs”, “still two eggs”, “only two eggs. Guess that’s all she’ll lay”. On the day that I proudly

wrote: “two eggs hatched, chicks fluffy white. Mother fed chicks tiny pieces from a dead rabbit,” I felt that I owned those eagles.

One bright morning after I had made my rounds noosing the lizards that lived in the rock wall below the house, and marking each one not previously tallied with a drop of green paint on its back (my reptile census), I found my uncle building a huge insulated box. It completely filled the bed of his pickup. When I asked its purpose, uncle Lowell jokingly (I hoped) said: “It’s my coffin.”

In fact, it was to protect himself from the night’s heat of Death Valley where he was off to do research on desert bighorn sheep. His sleeping box had an air-conditioner.

Lowell was an insomniac and close to the house at Sumner Ranch, he had built a thick-walled sod bedroom without windows to which he often retired to escape any night sounds that might intrude on his dreams. As that was the case, I find it hard to reconcile the idea of a power-driven system to keep his coffin cool. The racket made by a generator would surely overpower the discomfort of a hot desert night.

Lowell’s research in Death Valley resulted in the sixteenth of the forty publications on biological and ecological subjects he was to author during his career. (Seven of them were Sierra Club Bulletins).

By the time I was twelve I was helping with the hay harvest and joining my uncle on his Sunday drives down the mountain with a horse trailer in tow. He belonged to a roping club where he and fellow members lassoed and tied large calves for fun and cowboy practice.

At the age of eighteen my summers at the ranch were behind me. World War II had been raging for two years and I was drafted into the Army. Lowell took temporary leave from the Park Service and worked as a machinist and welder as his contribution to the war effort. Thereafter I

pretty much lost contact with my aunt and uncle during most of my adult years.

My cousin, Ruth, (named for my mother) was ten years younger than I. Because of that age difference I barely knew her as a kid. But I am indebted to her now for helping me to reconstruct a part of her father's life.

Lowell was born in 1907 in Flushing, Long Island. A month later, his mother died of an infection contracted during childbirth. His father's income was little more than sufficient. But his mother's family were wealthy millers and provided for their grandson's education. A succession of nannies and Grandmother Sumner taught him to read at home. He read voraciously so they started him off in the 2<sup>nd</sup> grade instead of in the first. He was happy reading interesting stories in the back of the room while the class struggled with its elementary cat, dog and cow primers. It may seem odd today that the child Lowell has been mentioned as wearing a dress with his hair in girlish ringlets. But in the early 1900s there was still a hangover of Victorian attitudes about the social place of six-year-olds. He wasn't the only little boy in his class to be dressed as a girl.

When Lowell was a child, his father, who was anything but nurturing, in referring to Lowell's mother's childbirth death, once said to him: "You killed the woman I loved." That devastating remark must have been stuck in Lowell's head all of his life. My cousin has said: "I've told my kids that I always knew that both of my parents loved me. My father didn't have that same feeling of safety to carry with him into the world. He'd never known a mother's love. He had never been held by a mother. I believe he was always looking for love, but didn't know what he was searching for. I'm sure that explains a lot about his personal quest in life."

When Lowell was six his father remarried, and a few years later the family moved to Pomona, California. There in the nearby Puente and Chino Hills were nesting hawks and eagles and fertile ground for his interest in natural history, later reflected in his first scientific publications about nesting

raptors, which were published while he was a student at Pomona College. He was employed as a biologist by the California Department of Fish and Game while studying at UC Berkeley, where his Master's thesis was an ecological study of quail.

In 1935, Lowell was hired by the National Park Service where he specialized in the ecology and restoration of grasslands, the study of big game species, and the ecology of predatory mammals. As a help to surveying vast areas for wildlife population numbers, Lowell bought an Army surplus Piper Cub airplane which he later upgraded to an Aeronca, then a Taylorcraft, and then a Cessna, all of which he maintained himself. His wife, Ethel, also learned to fly. And for sport they learned together to fly gliders.

Lowell achieved commercial pilot status and with his ability as a photographer made aerial boundary studies and on the ground biological recommendations for Olympic, Glacier, Kings Canyon, Mesa Verde, Yosemite, Zion, the proposed Great Basin National Parks, and for Katmai, Saguaro, Channel Islands, White Sands, and Pinnacles National Monuments.

By the year 1945 my aunt and uncle had sold Sumner Ranch, Lowell had been transferred from San Francisco, and they moved to New Mexico. They stayed at Seton Village in the compound of writer Ernest Thomson Seton, whose imaginative works of natural history fact-fiction had been my favorite reads as a youngster.

After a year in Santa Fe, the family moved back to California. It was there that Lowell and Ethel separated. Lowell was handsome and played the piano, accordion, and organ. He could dance, write music, write stories and plays. He could rope and ride and fix things. Women melted to his rugged look. Lowell married again, but this union quickly went sour.

Then Lowell met charismatic adventurer-author, Theodora Stanwell-Fletcher, who had published a popular book called *Driftwood Valley*. This was the story of a year spent in a remote area of northern British Columbia with her husband of the time, identified in the book only as “J”. They built a log cabin in the wilderness and studied and collected natural history specimens for the Provincial museum. It was a diary of high adventure, bitter winters and survival, just the sort of stuff that engaged Lowell’s imagination. Lowell married Theodora. But it was not a merger made in heaven. Still, it lasted seven years.

When Lowell was transferred to Washington, D.C. and assigned the post as chief research biologist for the entire National Park System, Theodora did not accompany him.

It may have been during the six years that Lowell served in D.C. that he earned the sobriquet, “Maverick”. Precisely whose toes he stepped on or what happened does not specifically appear in any sources I know, but there’s no doubt that he was unequivocally blunt on the many controversial issues that concerned him deeply. One author has characterized Lowell and fellow biologist, George Wright, as “operating like an opposition party within the NPS for decades and advanced a view ‘more compatible with that expressed in the 1964 Wilderness Act,’ as opposed to mainstream NPS thinking that promoted automobile access and expanded visitation.”

Lowell wrote the definitive “bible” on the method to assign a monetary value to National Parklands and individual animals. And he produced the first documented record for applying the carrying capacity concept to outdoor recreation—how many people can be in a wilderness at one time and still have wilderness conditions and experiences?

Lowell was outspoken on human population expansion and its future effects on Parks, wildlife and humanity. One quote of his has been repeated often, even in a place he would have abhorred.

*“As a biologist the human population explosion, and its declining spiral of natural resources, is to me the greatest threat of all. The time is ripe, even dangerously overripe, as far as the population control problem is concerned. We shall have to face up or ultimately perish, and what a dreary, stupid, unlovely way to perish, on a ruined globe stripped of its primeval beauty.”* (The quote was printed out of context in a popular book of pseudo science and conspiracy theory called *Behold a Pale Horse*. His words in that bizarre work surely embarrassed Lowell.)

As Lowell was deeply concerned with the rapidity of human population expansion he wrote several articles about its effects on nature. In one paper he chose as an analogy a community of beavers — industrious mammals that use technology, invention, and hard work to better their lives. They build dams and houses, create ponds and canals, log the forest and raft the timber through the canals to stock their lodges with winter’s food. Over time, nearby trees grow scarce and the canals are extended further into the wilderness. Now more trees are felled ever further from home. No problem... again the canals are lengthened. Like the humans the beavers are naturally emulating, they live the good life and multiply. But without ecological restraints more and more beavers build and consume their way beyond the limits of their habitat, their lives degrade, society collapses, and they die. That he chose this story as an analogy to human overpopulation was typical of his always probing, imaginative mind.

Lowell wrote of the environmental effects of the introduction of non-native plants and animals and methods of eradicating these damaging intruders — a step that brought this reaction from conservation biologist Jan van de Hoek: “It is amazing that the NPS allowed a biologist to make these statements in writing in a popular magazine article.” Did van Hoek thus give us a clue to our “Why Maverick?” question?

Sumner addressed his concern about non-native species during one of his surveys of California’s Channel Islands National Monument, later to become

a National Park. He found small Anacapa Island to be so overrun with introduced domestic rabbits that they had nearly eliminated some of the plant species that were unique to that isolated place. At their peak population when tiny East Anacapa was nearly denuded of rare one-of-a-kind plants, despite the protests of a few pitying citizens, Lowell's pragmatism prevailed and 3,350 rabbits were killed and the island's rare plant life began its eventual recovery.

During his first trip to isolated Anacapa Lowell met a hermit, Raymond "Frenchy" LeDreau, who lived alone in a shack built of driftwood. Lowell was so impressed with Frenchy's personality, knowledge of the island, and his concern for its wildlife, that he wrote in his report: "Mr. LeDreau was exceedingly friendly and helpful... He is undoubtedly a conscientious well meaning person who would be happy to assist in the preservation of the various features of the island. It is recommended that the livelihood of Mr. LeDreau not be interrupted and that he be allowed to remain on the island as long as he desires."

Again, Lowell was stepping outside of policy which frowned on non-Park Service people occupying Park's land, and again, the NPS listened to his personal opinion and accepted his recommendation. LeDreau acted as informal caretaker until at the age of 80, he fell from a cliff and sustained serious injuries. He was found by fishermen who took him to the mainland for treatment. "He apparently returned to his cove but the park service decided that it would be in his best interest to leave the isolated island and so, after 28 years on Anacapa, Frenchy was taken to the mainland where he immediately and mysteriously disappeared."

Glacier Bay National Monument (eventually to become a National Park) in southern Alaska had been created within lands traditionally used by Huna-Tlingit-Haida Indians as seal hunting and gull egg harvesting areas. The Indians made aboriginal "possessory rights" claims, which, of course, conflicted with National Park's policy of protecting the wildlife within the

Parks. The legal battle that followed lasted for many years and went as far as a dispute between the National Park Service and the State of Alaska over the ownership of Glacier Bay. Lowell was directed to make a study and report on Glacier Bay biology. A review of his report by writers sympathetic to the Huna-Tlingit position was obviously biased. They wrote: “[Sumner’s report] displayed the NPS’s strong predisposition to ban Native hunting in the monument... It was a strongly worded condemnation of the present policy [which allowed hunting]. Sumner’s report was flawed in many respects, however it was influential within NPS circles.” To be caught in the middle of this hot potato could have earned Lowell some more points toward Maverick status.

But it is probably the controversy stirred up by Lowell and his advocate NPS Planner George L. Collins following their exploration of northeastern Alaska that

got the pot boiling. It all came from Lowell’s strong feelings exemplified by these words: “This wilderness is big enough and wild enough to make you feel like one of the old-time explorers, knowing that each camp you place, each mountain climbed, each adventure with the boats, is in untouched country.”

Lowell and Collins were aided on their two summers-long survey by the Office of Naval Research which provided support. Lowell flew his own plane. In 1953 he wrote to his NPS superior: “One day we followed, by air, one of the great fresh ‘roadways’ of the caribou up into the headwaters of the Kongkut River across to the upper reaches of the Malcolm, at the foot of a towering, unnamed peak. The roadway led on and on over passes and down valleys and across rivers. Still following it, eastward, we crossed the International Boundary, soared low over the rocky gorge of the Firth River, climbed up a tributary valley of the Firth and over another pass into the Babbage River. And then all of a sudden, fifty air miles from where we had started trailing them, we came upon whole valleys, hill slopes, ravines and tundra flats *crawling* with caribou. They flowed up and down the slopes in

all directions and we flew for *miles* finding more great herds of them. Now we knew more vividly than ever what we have lost forever in the States. And we are losing fast up here too. “We circled and counted for about an hour and a half and estimated 26,500 caribou in this herd. One feels one has lived, and seen some of the world unspoiled, as it was intended people should see it, after an experience like that.”

He summarized his findings in the these statements:

“[The Old Crow and Porcupine Rivers] probably comprise the most outstanding big-game and waterfowl habitat of the entire Northland. The trend toward greatly increased use of the Arctic is already so unmistakable that the overall picture and the needs can be [clearly seen]... For the future needs of Alaska and the entire nation, this superb area should be planned and dedicated now for perpetual preservation as a scientific field laboratory and also for the education, enjoyment, and inspiration of all outdoor-minded people.”

In another letter to Sierra Club President, Richard M. Leonard, written by Lowell on August 12, 1953, he said: “The Kongakut is a rough, wild river in a [smallish] gorge. But the scale is big enough when you are the first people ever to take boats down it...

“The cascades and rapids, and the big boulders, have made us battle to save the boats, and ourselves, too, for days. We tried riding in the boats at first, but couldn’t manage them in the whirlpools and cascades, so we had to let them down through such places with ropes, working in the rushing white water up to our hip pockets. If you get in any deeper you get carried away. In fact, it is *very* hard to stand up in this water if its above one’s knees. I don’t know how many times we have been knocked down by the current or dragged through boulders and water by the boats, but on our toughest day we were in the water from 8:30 A.M. ‘till 10:30 P.M.—too busy and too tired to slap at the mosquitoes. We have only sunk a boat once, when a boulder ripped its side, and we saved everything and mended

the boat. Now we are past the narrows and although it still takes some fancy work to make all the sharp bends in the river, by comparison it's like 'Cruising down the River on a Sunday Afternoon.' We still see a wolf near camp occasionally, and moose are common. But the big excitement is about over."

Lowell made the first comprehensive biological survey of this great resource. "No refuge was established for more visionary purposes. Here the founders discovered values that are enduring and that transcend physical boundaries. These values touch millions of Americans who might never visit but who find inspiration and hope believing that the Refuge will always be wild and free."

That was *then* and this is *now*, and the most controversial conservation issue ever debated in the United States still festers. Lowell considered the designation of ANWR as a Wildlife Refuge to be the finest accomplishment of his career.

But in spite of the various controversies that Lowell's outspokenness created, all was not hardship in Washington for Sumner. Within his office he met a kindred soul, Marietta McDaniels. They married in 1961. Marietta recognized Lowell's needs and made sure that he got all of the nurturing and caring she could give. Lowell and Marietta retired to the small village of Glenwood in southwestern New Mexico in 1967. There, he dug deeply into another passion—music. He composed compositions for the piano and joined a local group with similar musical feelings.

He continued nagging at local government people over environmental causes—air quality in this otherwise pristine part of the world that was being smothered by the smoke from copper smelters and coal-fired power plants.

As age made its inroads on his always idiosyncratic mind, Lowell prepared for an uncertain future by burying large bottles filled with silver coins in his backyard. He chose several locations, three were sketched on lined note paper with directions—five feet toward SE corner of house, six feet west of third fence post, etc. When Marietta, Ruth and her two children, dug up the mass of silver from three sites and took the treasure to the bank, the coin-sorting machine got so hot it broke down. The fourth cache, if there was one, like the mystery of the enigmatic man who may have buried it, has never been completely revealed.

Lowell died in nearby Silver City at the age of 81 after an unsuccessful cancer surgery. Throughout his hospitalization Marietta was able to occupy the bed next to Lowell. She was with him to the end, giving him her heart and all the love he had missed as a child.

So... have we found the answer to our question—*Why Maverick?* We have uncovered some clues, but does blunt talking about controversial issues make a maverick? Lowell was singled out with the highest honors the National Park Service bestows on its members--Superior Accomplishment and Outstanding Performance Awards. In a letter of thanks to the NPS Director, Lowell said that his years within the National Park Service meant a great deal more to him than “a happy and productive career. It has meant a feeling of belonging to a very wonderful family—the National Park Service family... I feel this way about it because it appears that the people in my “family” put into the wording of the award an expression of their attitude that clearly goes beyond perfunctory commendation.”

Maybe Lowell Sumner wasn't a maverick after all.

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This essay was written by Jack Couffer (b. 1924), nephew of E. Lowell Sumner (1907-1989), National Park Service biologist. Lowell Sumner's daughter, Ruth, was named for Jack Couffer's mother.

